



## Essex Health Protection Unit

Further advice on any of the areas discussed or copies of this sheet may be obtained from the unit.

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# Factsheet on Chickenpox

## What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox (Varicella) is an acute and highly infectious viral disease.

It is most common in children under 10 years in whom it is usually mild. It tends to be more serious in adults, particularly pregnant women, but also in very young babies and in those whose immunity is impaired.

## What are the signs of Chickenpox?

Blisters appear on the face and scalp, spreading to the trunk and abdomen and eventually to the limbs. After 3-4 days they dry with a granular scab and are usually followed by further crops. There may be symptoms for 1 to 2 days before the appearance of the rash, such as headache, sore throat and feeling off-colour.



## How long is it infectious?

The incubation period is between 9 and 19 days. The virus is present at the back of the nose and throat in the first few days and in the fluid of the blisters before they dry

up. The infectious period is from one to two days before the rash appears until the blisters are scabbed over. (Normally 5-7 days.)

### **How is Chickenpox spread?**

It is spread directly by personal contact or droplet, and indirectly through articles freshly soiled by discharge from the vesicles.



When all the lesions have scabbed the patient is no longer infectious. Treatment is normally aimed at relief of symptoms, however, there is specific treatment available (anti-viral drug therapy) where the circumstances indicate the need for this.

### **How is Chickenpox related to Shingles?**

Both diseases are caused by the same virus. You must have had chickenpox at some time in the past if you have shingles.

### **Key Points**

90% of adults in the UK are immune to chickenpox, many of these people will have had mild infection and may not even know they have had chickenpox.

Pregnant women should contact their GP as soon as possible if they have been in contact with chickenpox and have no definite history of having had the disease.

### **Commonly asked questions**

#### **If you haven't had chickenpox can you catch it from someone with shingles?**

If you haven't had chickenpox and you come into close contact with the fluid from shingles blisters you may develop chickenpox. See key points above.

#### **If you have had chickenpox can you catch shingles from someone with chickenpox?**

If you have previously had chickenpox and you come into close contact with another person who has chickenpox your body should produce antibodies to the virus and stop you becoming affected.

#### **If you have had chickenpox can you catch shingles from someone with shingles?**

Because chickenpox and shingles are caused by the same virus, the answer to this question is the same as for the previous one.

